

**The ability of art to transform our
lives, to facilitate change...or simply
inform us**

Kim V. Goldsmith
Animal in Art lecture series,
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Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784

“...he (David) believed that the right kind of art could transform a mere gallery of spectators into a moral community.”

– Simon Schama writing about Neo-classic artist, Jacques-Louis David.

In his book *The Power of Art*, Simon Schama writes about artist of the French Revolution period, Jacques-Louis David, as a man who believed **that the right kind of art could transform a mere gallery of spectators into a moral community.**

The idea of State before family or God before self is not a new idea when you consider the history of art...and if we understand how art was used as propaganda in the past, is it possible art still has the power to transform our lives today?

Morality is perhaps not our most pressing issue today, but certainly climate change and the management of our natural resources, rural decline and growing health issues are top of the agenda in regional Australia.

Are the governments of today likely to demand that we put the Environment before family? While it certainly doesn't appear to be the case – some of our artists are starting to raise this question through their work.

Culture as Nature



JMW Turner, *Rain, steam, speed*, 1844

By the 19th century the Industrial Revolution was beginning to appear in landscape paintings, such as that of one of my favourites of that era, by Turner. However, Turner was not a man well understood by the times in which he lived.

He was a romantic who *removed himself from Victorian taste that prized, above all else, the dependable factuality of life...a world governed by engineering.*

Art critic, Robert Hughes wrote in his book *The Shock of the New*, that until about the 1930s, images of Nature were the keys to feeling in art...He argues this sense has been dulled because Nature has been replaced by **“the culture of congestion of cities and mass media.”** He writes: “We are crammed like battery hens with stimuli, and what seems significant is not the quality or meaning of the messages, but their excess. Overload has changed our art.”

There is more competition for our attention in the world today than there was in the days of David and Turner.



As some of you may know, as well as being an artist, I'm also a communications consultant...someone who helps others communicate their message – mostly in words – verbal and written – using a range of channels to distribute the message.

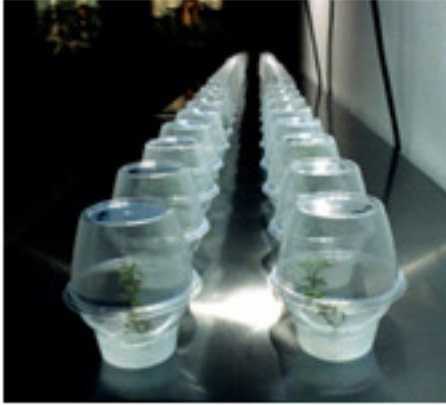
However, increasingly in my communication work, I'm using my art and the language of art to help those who do not connect with or understand words nearly as well as a visual forms of communication.

An example of the practical application of this is in marketing. The development of brands illustrates how powerful visual communication can be in a commercial world.

A brand is the visual, emotional, rational, and cultural image that you associate with a company or a product.

Every business has a brand. It's the sum of everything an organisation is, says, and does. So, what about the art business? Like it or not, artists and their work have a brand too...some are strong and easily identifiable, some get lost in the fog.

Art in science



Natalie Jeremijenko, trees being cloned for the *One Trees* project, 1998 - 2004



Janet Laurence installing *Birdsong*, 2006, collaborative installation with sound by Ross Gibson, Object Gallery

There are some artists who use the best of our contemporary world – its technology, its engineering, its science and mass media to explore the issues of our world. **Natalie Jeremijenko** is a US-based new media artist who works across disciplines to present new technologies for social change. One such work installed cloned trees in a large scale public artwork called *One Trees*. One thousand trees were grown over two years with the goal of providing a **public platform for ongoing discussions around genetic engineering**.

They were then planted across San Francisco. There is a strong link here to the 1982 work of **Joseph Beuys** called, *7000 Oaks*, which saw 7,000 oak trees planted with four foot high basalt columns in different locations around the world - including Europe, America and Australia.

Australian artist, **Janet Laurence** has an attraction to damaged landscapes and endangered species, often producing work in response to specific sites or environments using a diverse range of materials. Her themes address alchemical transformation, history and perception, and she works across art, science, imagination and memory – often in collaboration with others.

All her work is grounded in nature, and her use of organic and man-made materials such as perspex, industrial-strength glass and aluminium, alongside plant life and museum specimens, materially reflect the concepts of nature she has is communicating.

The key to all these works are they are **inter-disciplinary and participatory** – requiring others to help make it happen.

“Particular approaches to the creative arts...are capable of producing knowledge which citizens need for complex risk-filled decisions about social, economic and environmental issues. The arts provide a trust building approach which creates the preconditions for knowledge and innovation.”

- National ArtsEco Forum submission summary extract (to the Review of the National Innovation System), April 2008

Contemporary, multi-media artists such as Jeremijenko and Laurence play an important role in prompting constructive debate and facilitating creative problem-solving in our society.

The **National ArtsEco Forum** formed in about 2005, bringing together professionals from a broad range of sectors, to consider the creativity and processes of knowledge production, underpinning ecological problem-solving. They reviewed a huge number of case studies and analysed cultural activity linked to ecological concerns. They mapped out the transformative role of the arts to influence policy development - and how creativity had been applied to the implementation of solutions across many sectors.

In their submission to the Innovations Review Panel in 2008, they concluded that Australia must develop a **unified innovations policy** acknowledging and supporting the roles of the creative arts.



Above: *Feathered Nest*, 2004, barbed wire, copy of the NSW Native Vegetation Act, red enamel paint



Right: *Boxed In*, 2008, 40 photographic cubes (5 prints x 8) installed on a plinth

I've spoken so far about some of the artists whose work I greatly admire. Now to my own works of the past few years and where I see my work within the paradigm that's up for discussion here tonight...

Rural and natural resource management issues have dominated much of my conceptual exploration since about 2004. I initially started out working these issues in paint – creating stark, ochre-dominant, droughted landscapes. I also explored political topics of the time, such as the NSW Native Vegetation legislation and water sharing plans, and used strong mediums such as barbed wire, bitumen and layers of tinted polyurethane to express the intense emotion that was engulfing me at the time.

By 2006 I was using more photography in my work, not just to develop ideas, but as the end artwork. Until now, it had simply been a documentary function of my communication roles. **For me the issues were still very visual**, which was largely due to living and working on our family farm, through the drought that marked the start of this century. The work at the bottom of the screen, was an attempt to make 2D photography a more 3D experience - creating a wall of photographic cubes you could walk around. I wanted those viewing the work to participate more in the reading of it– to experience it more fully than they had perhaps done in the past.

🍋 Perspectives Art Ecology

2030

Enter. Sit. Imagine.



As I mentioned before, the issues I was exploring were visual...so what happens when you take away the visual cues in an artwork? I did this in one of my installation works created for the 2009 exhibition, *Perspectives. Art. Ecology*.

To communicate with this work, participants were asked to use **smell, touch and sound**.

The sound you hear now, lemon-scented gum leaves and humid warmth were the key elements of the work, evoking strong memories and emotions in some of those who entered the space. One woman wrote to me to say that it brought back her **childhood memories** of being on the river...She wrote: *I was able to think back as if I was experiencing it as a child...* I would argue she was transformed for that moment in time.

My intention with this work was to explore the idea of a two degree increase in average temperatures by 2030...however, given that the work was installed in the middle of winter, it was a pleasant place to be! It didn't make the point I was after, but it was certainly a work that attracted a lot of repeat visitors, who I hope had time to think about some of the messages contained in other works in the space at the same time they were enjoying their local mid-winter escape.

But did it change the way people, collectively, think? Not on its own.

Little River Dreaming



One day last year on my way back to Dubbo from Yeoval, where I had been interviewing community members and photographing local landmarks, I stopped off where the Obley Road crosses Little River. Whilst I was in Yeoval, I had been told that the river was not flowing and was essentially just a series of water holes despite good rain and flows further upstream. They said the water would come down the system, but the day I was there it was just a sandy river bed with a few big, stagnant water holes.

I set my video camera up on the edge of a waterhole and recorded about 10 minutes of footage and sound, to create this 5 minute video, which also incorporates statistics about water usage in the Central West catchment and Dubbo.

During the post-production phase of this work, there was some debate between the curator and myself about the use of these statistics. I fought to keep them in, as I felt that because of the poetic aesthetics of the video footage, there was still a point to be made, that might have otherwise been lost. It was a personal protest, perhaps shouted a little louder than some of the other works I had created for this exhibition.



Sitting behind the exhibition, *Perspectives. Art. Ecology.* was 6 months of **community-based research** across several Central West and Western communities. My component was called ***The Coming of Age Project***, which included setting up a blog site and interviewing key people in the community about their connection to their environment and their hopes for its future.

The hopes and concerns of participants were documented through writings, blog entries, emails, video interviews and photographs...and finally, through the body of work I created for the exhibition. While no one work could be credited as a “tool of change”, I do believe that it went some way towards informing those who saw the exhibition, of the hopes and desires of individuals within the community, and about the environmental issues impacting the region at that time.

I have no doubt that this approach produced knowledge relating to “complex risk-filled decisions about social, economic and environmental issues” – as referred to in the ArtsEco Forum submission of 2008.

bird/chop



Since the *Perspectives. Art. Ecology.* show, which finished in July 2009, I've continued to work on artworks that are driven by a need to communicate my concerns and those of others about the future of our environment. Late last year, the artist collective I exhibit with, Fresh Arts, had a group show in an old butcher's shop in Millthorpe on the Central Tablelands. I had an opportunity to create another site-specific, multi-sensory installation within this space, in particular, in the old cool room of the butcher's shop.

For this work, called *bird/chop*, my research focused on the history of settlement and development in and around Millthorpe and Orange. Today, agriculture, viticulture and mining are major industries. Land clearing for these purposes has seen the habitat of many bird and bat species threatened.

In an exhibition filled with works for sale, many of which did sell...what was my point? It was an opportunity for me to communicate these issues in a commercial space, in the heart of grazing and mining country. Was the work successful in motivating the public, informing them or being a tool of change? Probably not...but it did impact on some of the individuals who experienced it.

The video documentation of the work is now on Youtube and I use it often to demonstrate the type of work that I do. So, it still has a life and a purpose in the scheme of my practice...which may, in time, build to a point where it can at the very least, play a role in informing the public about the issues that concern me and drive my concepts.

Believe. Connect. Act.



Kim V. Goldsmith, *Salt of the earth*, 2010, digital photograph

*Individual grains do little on their own. Collectively, they make an impact.
Critical mass creates both negative and positive forces.*

In 2010, I have a few projects on the boil, one of which includes a new video installation work which is exploring the ideas of disconnect. The working title is Believe. Connect. Act.

The digital video and stills works evolving from this project come from an idea of identities and convictions forming through connections to place.

But where does that belief come from when so many are disconnected from food production and the environment in its natural, healthy state?

I'm not sure art has the power to change the masses, but it certainly has the power to change the individual. **It has undoubtedly changed my life.** It has the power to engage the individual, who in turn engage others. Here in lies the power of art...and the power of collective action.

Community engagement



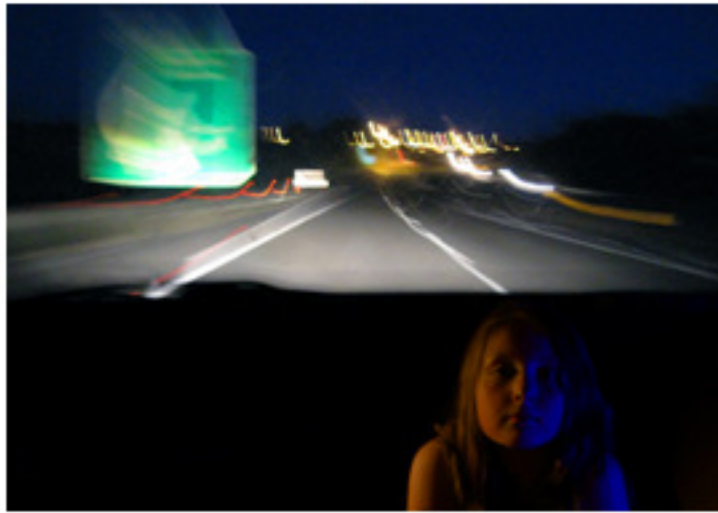
Through TAFE I'm working with a group of women from three small communities between here and Orange. The class is a mix of art school graduates through to those who have never drawn or painted a picture since primary school. They're all working together to create artworks for a community exhibition in October under the broad theme of Celebrating our Environment.

Can these women change the way they think in the process of working collectively towards the same end?

In the space of four weeks, I have already seen change in the way these women think about the world around them. By asking them to research concepts for their artworks, they have already started to see their local environment and their place in it in a different way. They are connecting with not only each other, but with the artists, works and information they are researching in the process.

Their community exhibition may not change the world, but if change starts at home, it may just bring a community together to celebrate their connection to place and what they presently have and give them cause to continue fighting for the future.

Observer or participant?



Kim V. Goldsmith, *Untitled #03*, digital photograph

US-based contemporary art curator, **Stephanie Smith** was quoted in 2008 as saying that artists such as Jeremijenko and others working as eco-artists *are creating an arena for small scale social experiments that could potentially influence the larger culture*. She said, "If you have enough of these microgestures and they start to link up, they could really make a difference." **The Australia Council published a book in 2004 titled *Art and Wellbeing***, in which the then Australia Council CEO, Jennifer Bott commented: *Investing in creative, collaborative activities can help agencies to implement their policies, and contribute to individual and community wellbeing. Such investment needs to be integrated with and respond to social, environmental and economic development.*

Interesting that four years down the track, the National ArtsEco Forum was making the same recommendation to the review of the National Innovation System. In May 2009, the Australian Government released its **innovation policy agenda to 2020**. While I haven't trawled through the entire report, the executive summary mentions creativity only once – in Senator Kim Carr's Foreword, where he writes: *Tough times demand creative solutions.*

So, in 2010, as we continue to stare down the barrel of massive, global environmental issues and our governments continue to stall for time...it may well be that art will again gain some transformative power - if artists take up the cause and the public support them.

In the words of **Robert Hughes**: *Perhaps (or so one devoutly hopes) artists are waiting in the wings now as they were a century ago, slowly maturing and testing the imaginative visions that will enable them to transcend the stagnant orthodoxies of their time...He also believes that fresh, creative cycles of art occur between the years '90 and '30...so, we must be in the midst of it!*

We all have the ability to generate a...

CREATIVE
RESPONSE TO
ADDRESS
PROBLEMS

<click> Since preparing the bulk of this presentation, I've read about a new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, due to open on August 21, called *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*.

The show is a collection of Australian and international contemporary artists responding to ecological concerns. The MCA have said that is the first major exhibition devoted to Australia's contemporary environmental debate in a major Australian art gallery.

There is little doubt the issues are snowballing and artists are jumping on board. The diversity of creative arts is a great vehicle for representing the wide-ranging debates and the diversity of the stakeholders – who are by the way, you and I – creative individuals.

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Writer Owen Craven said in his article about the MCA exhibition: *"There is no more prevalent a time than now for a major exhibition to give oxygen to the voices of artists discussing the topics as many other industries do the same."*

So, perhaps I am not the only one who believes that art does have the ability to transform our lives and facilitate change <click>...or at the very least – inform us. Just remember – we all have the seeds of creativity in us! Thank you.